

HEGEMONY AND IMPERIALISM IN THE INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM*

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The subject that convene us

THE MAIN GOAL of this conference was to examine the *problématique* of the new worldwide hegemony, the options for change and social movements. Without fear of exaggeration we might say that in their complex articulation these matters identify the fundamental challenges faced today by the men and women of our time who want to build a better world. Another world –as demanded along the length and breadth of our planet in recent years on the basis of a clear realization that the current world is unbearable because of its injustice and predatory nature. This world is the result of capitalist civilization, which like the monster in the most dreadful allegories devours its offspring, exhausts its non-renewable resources and irreparably destroys the environment that our species requires for survival. William

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Shakespeare's reflection, when he makes one of his characters say, "You take my life when you do take the means whereby I live," seems highly fitting. The predatory nature of capitalism, exacerbated in its current phase, has led precisely to this point: depriving three quarters of humanity of their livelihood and destroying the environment that made it possible for human life to appear and maintain itself on this planet. A civilization which in the name of efficiency, rationality and progress slowly and silently carries out the biggest genocide known in the history of humanity. Every year near forty million people, most of them children, die of hunger and curable diseases. In other words, in just one year capitalism annihilates more than half the number of victims caused by the Second World War over six years. The large social movements that today challenge this situation do so on the basis of the conviction that other world is not only possible but also necessary and urgent. I shall attempt, in the following pages, to set forth a brief summary of the debates held within the framework of this event. The emphasis will be placed both on the main areas of agreement and on the issues under dispute.

A new phase?

There is an extremely wide consensus in the sense that the world imperialist system has entered a new phase in its evolution. This transition didn't escape the notice of its spokespeople and ideological representatives, who hurried to endow this new stage with a name that underlined the dazzling features of its appearance while carefully hiding its deepest essence: globalization. The more striking aspects of this process seem to substantiate the idea of an increasing globalization of productive processes and of the operation of the diverse markets. Nevertheless, the scope of this phenomenon has been extraordinarily exaggerated and nowadays the available research already demonstrates that the much trumpeted globalization –which the French correctly call *mondialization*, something like "worldization," to allude to the will-related, not at all natural, elements that boost it– is a phenomenon that acquires a different solidity depending on what is being talked about. The international financial system has, no doubt, been

¹ We have examined this subject in *Tiempos violentos. Neoliberalismo, globalización y desigualdad en América Latina*, 2004 (1999), which includes a detailed bibliography on the issue.

globalized; but the same has not happened with trade in agricultural products and with a broad swath of the service sector¹.

The champions of neoliberalism were not tardy in announcing that the advent of globalization brought to an end “the age of imperialism”. This was now duly acknowledged while before its sole existence had been stubbornly denied, attributed to the feverish imagination of critics on the left, always ready to give vent to their visceral hate against the system with all types of charges and challenges. According to the right, the imperialist experience, already ended, was explained by a series of factors allegedly foreign to capitalism. Standing out among them were militarism, nationalism and protectionism. Exhibiting a colossal disregard for the lessons of history they isolated these factors from the reality of capitalist development, as if it hadn’t been precisely the latter which engendered them, and re-edited the dusty thesis of “sweet commerce” proposed, as Albert Hirschman rightly observed, by the first ideologists of bourgeois society over the course of eighteenth century. A thesis which, in essence, held that the development of trade calms spirits and curbs people’s “bellicose instincts.” If they trade, they said, there will be no wars. And despite the thorough refutation provided by history (and by the present) this thesis reappears in our time in the writings of globalization theorists.

The accelerated and profound changes experienced as of the closing decades of the last century left popular movements, and the left itself, deeply disconcerted. If the organic intellectuals of the right hastened to salute the novelties as a radical break with the opprobrious imperialist past, in the leftist camp confusion reached unthought-of levels when some of its most respected theorists stated, in agreement with their alleged adversaries, that global neoliberalism expressed the historical overcoming of imperialism, and that we were in front of a new reality of international politics and economics that could be given the name of “empire.” An empire, naturally, without imperialist relations of domination. An empire without imperialism, acknowledged in a play on words whose most important effect was to produce the ideological disarmament of contesting social forces. Since we have examined those theses –maintained fundamentally but not

2 Hardt’s and Negri’s theses have been subjected to extremely tough criticism from the moment they were rendered in *Empire* (2000). Daniel Bensaid, Alex Callinicos, Néstor Kohan, Ellen Meiksins Wood, Leo Panitch and the author of this article have discussed this work in detail from diverse perspectives.

exclusively by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri—*in extenso* elsewhere, we shall not attempt to refute them once again in this paper².

Nevertheless, what is being ratified for a long time now and has emerged quite clearly from the discussions of this Conference is that globalization could be better characterized not as the overcoming of imperialism but as a new phase within the imperialist stage of capitalism. Maybe we should ask ourselves whether it isn't a new "higher phase," to employ Lenin's celebrated expression, which poses serious problems of interpretation when it comes to identifying its fundamental features. In the discourse of neoliberalism, globalization is none other than the ratification of the inexorable "naturalness" of capitalism, exalted as a kind of "natural order of the universe," and the final stage of the historical movement finally imposed on the entire surface of the terrestrial globe and which expresses the selfish and acquisitive nature of the human species. As Franz Hinkelammert has pointed out in several of his writings, the corollary of this reasoning is the dehumanization of those who oppose the world dominance of capital. And in the same way that the native peoples of the Americas were massacred without remorse because, after all, their very condition as human beings had been denied to them because only beasts could be opposed to the advance of "civilization," the current victims and the opponents of capitalism will suffer the same fate. They too constitute a surplus population, unexploitable and superfluous, which does not deserve any respect and for whom human rights constitute a merciful fabrication. Genocide continues its march undaunted (Hinkelammert, 2002).

Things being this way, for the ideologists of neoliberalism globalization has unequivocal epistemological and political implications. With regard to the former, the primacy of the *pensamiento único* ("the single dominant thought"), constructed on the premises of neoclassical economics, the only one capable of deciphering the meaning and defining features of the new society. With regard to the latter, the enshrining of the Washington Consensus paradigm as the only possible economic policy, to which all others must be subordinated. As Margaret Thatcher put it, "there is no alternative." It is for this reason that social or political *problématiques* are posed as merely technical matters, independent of any ideological position. It is unnecessary to stop to refute this worldview constructed by the ideological apparatuses of capital. Let us say, simply, that this entire argumentation does not resist the evidence provided by history and by the contemporary situation.

The interpretation that emerges from the discussions held in this Conference shows that, far from diluting imperialism in a kind of benevolent empire, an empire that is innocuous and harmless, globalization has, on the contrary, produced a radical accentuation of the traditional features of imperialism, extraordinarily strengthening its genocidal and predatory nature.

The limits of classical theorization of imperialism

The foundations of the above-mentioned confusion are symptomatic of the shortcomings of the traditional theorization of imperialism in front of the transformations experienced by the capitalist mode of production over the course of the twentieth century. As was recalled at the time by the Indian Marxist Prabhat Patnaik in his brief essay which appeared in the *Monthly Review* at the beginning of the 1990s, the term “imperialist” had virtually disappeared from the media, literature and discourses of socialists and communists alike. (Patnaik, 1990) The same happened with the word “dependence,” paradoxically in a period in which dependence reached humiliating extremes in our countries. Whoever pronounced those words was quickly catalogued as an incurable nostalgic or a fanatic that stubbornly close his eyes to the evident transformations that had occurred in recent years. No “well-thinking” intellectual, politician or leader could incur in such an aberration within neoliberal capitalism without turning into the laughing-stock of the global village³. In any case, and setting this issue aside, the truth is that the vanishing of the *problématique* of imperialism and its disappearance from horizon of visibility of peoples was a symptom of two things. On one hand, of the irresistible ascent of neoliberalism as the ideology of capitalist globalization in the last two decades of the last century; on the other, a symptom of the notable transformations that occurred from the end of the Second World War on, which questioned some of the very premises of the classical theories of imperialism formulated in the first two decades of the century by Hobson, Hilferding, Lenin, Bukharin and Rosa Luxemburg, to mention only the main figures. Let us look at this latter in greater detail.

3 Regarding the ravages wrought by “well thinking” in our time, and especially among left-wing movements, consult the magnificent essay by the Spanish writer and playwright Alfonso Sastre (2003).

(a) To begin with, let us say that a decisive aspect of these theories was the tight association existing between imperialism and crisis of capitalism in the metropolitan economies. The former was seen, essentially, as the mechanism by which mature capitalism transitorily resolved the crises generated by the increase in the organic composition of capital and the decreasing trend of the profit rate. The period that began after the end of the Second World War plunged this relation flagrantly into crisis. Indeed, the “golden age” that unfolded between 1948 and the mid-1970s was the most successful boom period in the history of capitalism. At no other time had a cycle of prosperity persisted over the course of almost three decades, with rates of economic growth that were so high and that reached almost all capitalist economies. But, contradicting the postulates of classical theorization, that period was at the same time one of the most aggressive ones from the standpoint of imperialist, especially U.S., expansion, over the entire face of the earth. The classical connection between capitalist crisis and imperialist expansion was thus broken, triggering the perplexity of those who still clung to the classical formulations of imperialism. Capitalism was booming and imperialism was extending ever more strongly. The theory required an urgent revision (Panitch & Gindin, 2003: 30-31).

(b) Another verification that came to worsen the theoretical confusion in the ranks of the left was the following: in classical formulations the race for the appropriation of colonies and the carving up of the world had an inescapable colophon in inter-imperialist war. Economic rivalry sooner or later translated into military rivalry and armed conflict. There was the precedent supplied by the two great world wars that shook the first half of the twentieth century to provide an irrefutable proof of the truth of that assertion. The novelty contributed by the capitalist reconstruction of the second post-war period was that the exacerbated economic competition among the metropolitan countries has never been translated in the last fifty years into an armed encounter among them. To Kautsky goes the merit of having been the first in glimpsing these new realities, which does not preclude the fact that his thesis of “ultra-imperialism” suffers from serious defects. One of them, perhaps the main one, is his having concluded that the coalition among the imperialist monopolies of the great powers would inaugurate an era of peace. If the ideological mentor of the Second International was able to accurately discern this trend toward inter-

imperialist convergence, his strong Eurocentrism prevented him from foreseeing that the latter would not bring about a Kantian “perpetual peace.” War was to continue, except that it would now take place in Third World settings and would take place against their peoples. In any case, and to summarize, this new situation posed a serious challenge to the conventional wisdom of classical theories of imperialism, steeping the left into a paralyzing perplexity.

(c) Lastly, another issue that threw classical theorizations about imperialism into crisis was, in the current phase of accelerated *mondialization* of capitalist accumulation, the unprecedented expansion of capitalism across the length and breadth of the planet. While, as Marx and Engels noted in the *Communist Manifesto*, capitalism has always been a social regime of production characterized by expansionary tendencies, both in physical and in social geography, the classical theorizations of imperialism rested on an assumption that in our times is unsustainable: the existence of vast peripheral regions (or “agrarian” regions, as was the customary expression at that time) in which capitalism was virtually unknown. As Ellen Meiksins Wood accurately points out, classical theories of imperialism “assume, by definition, the existence of a ‘non capitalist environment’ as a condition for its very existence”. (2003: 127) In other words, metropolitan capitalism required the presence of an agrarian, primitive, peripheral pre-capitalist world to provide it with the necessary oxygen to survive the harsh conditions imposed by the crisis in the metropolises. Hence the violent struggle to carve up the world and the interminable colonial annexation wars. Nevertheless, our time is the witness of an accelerated *mondialization* of capitalism, especially after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the implosion of the former Soviet Union and, almost simultaneously, the opening of China to market forces, all of which presupposes the constitution of a worldwide space –we might say a global one– in which the predominance of capitalism is unarguable. Despite the virtual subsuming of the former “agrarian regions” to the logic of capital, imperialism continues its march and, albeit with many problems, survives its own crises. As Perry Anderson accurately pointed out, when it appeared that in the 1970s and early 1980s it was facing its most serious crisis since the times of the Great Depression, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the opening of China blew fresh air on capitalist reproduction (Anderson, 2003).

Responses to the new challenges

Now then, the transcendence of these changes –which are certainly not the only ones, although they are the most important ones– has given rise to three different attitudes. On one hand, there are those on the dogmatic left who refuse to recognize the reality and importance of these changes, arguing that they are only superficial transformations lacking in significance. Nothing important has changed and therefore nothing needs to be changed or revised in classical theory. “Essentialism” hinders the construction of policies because it is unable to establish differences: Scandinavian capitalism is the same thing as the capitalist governments of Latin America. As capitalism continues to be capitalist, imperialism is the same. Its changes are merely superficial. The theory remains unscathed and there is nothing to modify, because nothing has changed.

There are, next, those who on the basis of the recognition of such changes turn to backing theses located on the antipodes of those they had traditionally favored. In some cases, as in the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, to recognize –implicitly and with embarrassment– the final victory of capitalism and to seek consolation in a proposal of “democratic radicalization” which, both in fact and in theory, limits itself to softening the most irritating aspects of bourgeois dominance without proposing its abolition. As regards the subject that we are dealing with, those who adopt this defeatist attitude announce “the end of the imperialist era” and the advent of a new form of international organization, “the empire,” which is supposed to have freed itself from its predecessor’s defects. The *locus classicus* of this position is, of course, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s book, *Empire* (2000), to which we have referred above (Boron, 2002).

There are, lastly, those of us who, recognizing the enormous importance of the changes alluded to, insist that imperialism hasn’t transformed itself into its opposite, nor has it been diluted into a vaporous “international system” or into the vagueness of a new “global system of domination.” It has been transformed, but continues to be imperialist. In the same way that years do not convert the young Adam Smith into the old Karl Marx, nor does the identity of an individual vanish by the mere passing of time, the mutations experienced by imperialism haven’t even remotely led to the construction of a

4 In this section we base ourselves extensively on our *Empire & Imperialism* (Forthcoming).

non-imperialist international economy⁴. It is undeniable that a fundamental continuity exists between the supposedly “new” global logic of the empire –its fundamental actors, its institutions, norms, rules and procedures– and that which existed in the presumably extinct phase of imperialism. Beyond certain modifications in its morphology, the strategic actors of both periods are the same: the large monopolies of transnational reach and with a national base and the governments of the metropolitan countries; the institutions that marshal international economic and political flows continue to be those that put their ominous seal on the imperialist phase that some already consider concluded, like the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank (WB), the World Trade Organization (WTO) and others of their ilk; and the rules of the game of the international system are those that are dictated principally by the United States and global neoliberalism, imposed by coercion at the height of the neoconservative counter-revolution in the 1980s and early 1990s through a combination of pressures, loans “conditionalities” and manipulations of every kind. Through their design, purpose and functions these rules of the game do nothing but reproduce and perpetuate the old imperialist structure in which, as it would say in *The Leopard*, “If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change.” Paraphrasing Lenin we might say that the empire imagined by Hardt and Negri, or by the theoreticians of globalization, is the “higher phase” of imperialism and nothing more. Its operating logic is the same, and so are the ideology that justifies its existence, the actors that energize it and the unfair results that reveal the dogged persistence of the relations of oppression and exploitation.

But as we said earlier, such a dynamic form of production as capitalism –“which incessantly revolutionizes itself,” as Marx and Engels remind us in the *Communist Manifesto*– and such a flexible historical product as that of imperialism (its structure, the logic of its operation, its consequences and its contradictions) cannot be fully understood via a Talmudic rereading of the classical texts. It is obvious that today’s imperialism isn’t the same as before. The “gunboat diplomacy” of Theodore Roosevelt is today substituted by a much more lethal weapon: the army of economists and “experts” of the IMF, the WB and the WTO. Foreign indebtedness and the conditions set by the multilateral banks controlled by imperialism are much more efficient instruments of domination than those employed in the past. Occupation armies are necessary in very specific circumstance –as in

Iraq, for example— but the routine of imperialist oppression can do without them on a day-by-day basis. Docile governments, media controlled by the monopolies and converted into mere propaganda factories, demobilized and demoralized civil societies, and corrupt politicians are much more useful than Marine platoons or Apache helicopters. If, in the past, coups d'état and military dictatorships were required to impose imperialist policies, in today's Latin America this job is performed by "democratic" governments arising from the popular vote and that have made a cult of betrayal and mendacity. Lastly, except for very specific situations like Iraq and Afghanistan, territorial occupation has become redundant since, by means of trade opening, privatizations and deregulation, the economies subjected to imperialism are today more dependent than ever without the need to fire a single shot or deploy a single soldier.

That is why we said that imperialism has changed, and in some aspects the change has been very significant. But it can never be overstressed that, despite everything, it has not been transformed into its opposite, as is suggested to us by neoliberal mystification, turning into a "global" economy in which all nations are "interdependent." It continues to exist and to oppress peoples and nations, and to sow pain, destruction and death in its wake. Despite the changes it preserves its identity and structure, and continues to perform its historical role in the logic of the global accumulation of capital. Its mutations, its volatile and dangerous mixture of persistence and innovation, require the construction of a new approach that will allow us to grasp its current nature. This isn't the place to proceed to an examination of the diverse theories on imperialism. Let us say, by way of summary, that beyond the transformations indicated above, its fundamental attributes pointed out by the classical authors at the time of the First World War continue to be current by virtue of the fact that imperialism is not an accessory feature or a policy pursued by some states but a new stage in the development of capitalism. This stage is marked, today with greater forcefulness than in the past, by the concentration of capital, the overwhelming predominance of the monopolies, the heightened role of financial capital, the export of capital and the carving up of the world into different "spheres of influence." The acceleration of the process of *mondialization* that took place in the last quarter of a century, far from mitigating or dissolving the imperialist structures of the world economy, did nothing but extraordinarily strengthen the structural asymmetries that define the insertion of different countries

in it. While a handful of nations within developed capitalism reinforced their capacity to, at least in part, control productive processes on a worldwide scale, the financialization of the international economy and the increasing circulation of goods and services, the enormous majority of countries saw their foreign dependence deepen and the gap that separates them from the metropolises widen to scandalous levels. Globalization, in sum, consolidated imperialist domination and deepened the subjection of peripheral capitalisms, ever more incapable to exercising a minimal control over their domestic economic processes. This continuity of the fundamental parameters of imperialism can ill be disguised by a change of name, calling what previously was imperialism “empire.”

Characterization of the new phase: lonely superpower or imperial triad?

Now then, how should this new phase of imperialism be characterized? Let us recall what has been suggested in some of the papers that have been presented at this same podium and very especially the contributions of Samir Amin, Noam Chomsky and Perry Anderson collected in this book. In the first place, what becomes clear is that a very pronounced centralization has taken place in the worldwide structure of imperialism, the center of gravity of which has shifted markedly toward the United States. This is a conclusion which, as is known, is very controversial. From this same rostrum Samir Amin posed the thesis of a “collective imperialism,” the idea of an imperial triad. This thesis is not unaware of the already mentioned trend but, to our understanding, strongly diminishes the centrality exercised by the U.S. in sustaining and reproducing the imperialist system at a worldwide level. In any case it is convenient to point out that this is one of the major subjects of debate; a debate which, of course, has not yet been settled. What seems to us is that on the basis of what has been discussed here the imperial triad –the United States, Japan and the European Union– is only apparently such. Stated differently: it is a triad in some aspects but not in others. Which might be the aspects in which this triad is diluted and gives pride of place to the “lonely super-

5 Of Ana Esther Ceceña we recommend her compilation along with Emir Sader (2002).

power”? Which are those in which imperialist domination is constituted as a collective undertaking?

It seems irrefutably evident that at the military level the triad does not exist. At the most recent presentation of the panel on “War and Trade in the Empire,” the Cuban economist Orlando Martínez and the Mexican professor at UNAM Ana Esther Ceceña presented overwhelming data relating to the extraordinary centralization of military power in the hands of the United States, unprecedented in history⁵. Thus, talking about a triad in this sphere makes little sense. From the military standpoint, the European Union and Japan are merely small satellites of the United States, which are in no condition to act autonomously of the directives emanating from Washington. The European Union has been unable, for decades, to raise the flag first hauled up by Charles de Gaulle in pursuit of a common defense policy. Its economicist meanness is revealed by the distance between the ardor with which the leaders in Brussels defend their common agricultural policy from the indecorous pusillanimity with which they broach issues relative to common European defense.

The United States is currently responsible for half the world's expenditure on armament, and maintains bases and military training missions in one hundred and twenty-one countries on the planet, something absolutely unheard-of in the history of mankind. That country has, without any doubt, turned into that “lonely sheriff” who was talked about in a very important article, written some years ago already by one of the greatest theorists of the U.S. right: Professor Samuel Huntington. In the military terrain there is no such triad, nor is there a collective imperialism. The only thing there is is the almost all-pervading power of the United States and a discourse of world domination by force that, as Noam Chomsky recalled in his speech, has only one precedent in the twentieth century: Adolf Hitler.

The already mentioned centralizing trend is also perceivable, albeit in a more attenuated form, in the economic arena. The available data speak of a high concentration of wealth, technology and markets to the benefit of the large transnational corporations of the United States. Transnational, it is necessary to point out, because of the scope of their operations but not because of the nature of their ownership system: they are U.S. corporations, just as there are other companies that are French, German or Japanese but have a global scope. According to a study produced by the *Financial Times* a little over a year ago, 48% of the five hundred largest transnational corporations have their head-

quarters and are rooted in the United States. And if instead of focusing attention on the five hundred biggest we direct our glance at the super-elite constituted by the world's fifty largest corporations, 70%, i.e. 35 companies, are of U.S. origin. And this is repeated when one looks at the proportion constituted by U.S. corporations in different branches of industrial production, or of services. In the computer field, of the world's ten largest computer companies, seven are from the U.S. And if we speak of the production of software, of the top ten, nine are from that country; and in the pharmaceutical industry six of the ten biggest ones are from the United States. In other words: imperialism evidently has a center of gravity that is located in U.S. territory.

This is another feature that has been accentuated in the current phase: the first was the military question; the second, which we have just seen, that of economic concentration. There is a third, which is the increasing tyranny of financial markets, whose dynamism and implacable voracity are to a great extent responsible for the recessionary trends that prevail in the world economy. Ninety-five percent of all the capital that circulates daily in the international financial system, equivalent to a figure higher than the combined gross product of Mexico, Brazil and Argentina, is purely speculative. They are movements of capital deposited for a term not higher than seven days; that is to say, a period absolutely incompatible with the possibility of investing that capital in a productive process that generates economic growth and social welfare.

It is precisely for this reason that Prof. Susan Strange called this system by a very appropriate name: "casino capitalism." This parasitic and profit-obsessed capitalism generates extremely high profit margins in favor of its purely speculative nature, and enormous corporate risks, because in the same way that very large amounts of money are earned in a financial operation that only takes a few minutes, a fortune can be lost overnight. This capitalism discourages investment in productive sectors, because even the capitalists most inclined toward investing in the production of goods find it hard to resist the temptation to place a rising share of their stock of capital in short-term speculative operations which, if successful, will guarantee them profit rates unthinkable in the industrial sector. This therefore generates disinvestment in the productive activities, prolonged economic recession, high unemployment rates (because for these speculative operations it isn't necessary to hire too many workers, nor to build factories or sow fields), a general impoverishment of the population, fiscal crisis

(because it is a mechanism of accumulation through which capital controls can be evaded, weakening states' financial foundations), and all this, in turn, has a very negative impact on the environment and, it goes without saying, on economic growth. It is unnecessary to state that the center of all this system is located in the United States. Not only the center; so is its principal political operator in the international arena, the White House, through the control that the Federal Reserve and Wall Street exercise on international financial markets and on the misnamed multilateral financial institutions, like the IMF, WB and WTO, which, as recognized by Zbigniew Brzezinski, are mere agencies of the United States government (Brzezinski, pp. 28-29).

One of the consequences of all the above has been the militarization of the international system and a rising trend to resort to violence to preserve a world order –in actual fact, a scandalous disorder– that is ever more unfair and inequitable. Another consequence: the crisis of the United Nations system and in international law. We have heard it in various presentations, particularly those made by Noam Chomsky and Perry Anderson. We can observe it, additionally, by watching the international scene on a day-by-day basis and the sorry role performed by the United Nations in this crisis. We see it, too, when we verify the accelerated dismantling of multilateral negotiation systems and the weakening of international law. The most evident proof was the invasion and the razing of Iraq without the authorization or the consent of the United Nations. Another of the consequences: the criminalization of social protest, in which the figures of the poor, the unemployed, the homeless or undocumented and, in general, of those who are condemned by the system, are Satanized and turned into sinister and dehumanized figures. In this way, the victims of capitalism, those who are condemned to exclusion and to slow genocide are transformed into criminals, drug traffickers or terrorists. Thanks to the alchemy of neoliberal globalization the victims evolve into culprits. Another of the consequences that is verified both in the central countries and in those on the periphery of the international capitalist system is the apparently unstoppable hollowing out of democratic régimes. Democracies that are ever less democratic, that have ever less popular legitimacy; that promote apathy and lack of interest in public affairs. Politics has turned into some-

6 This being a point that roundly disproves the neoliberal premise that the market is “the other face” of democracy. For an examination of this fallacy see Boron (2000).

thing that frequents the marketplace and is subdued to its tyranny; the street and the public square, deprived of its dynamism, are merely nostalgic memories of their past; elections have degenerated into a painful sham devoid of meaning and of transformational efficacy. Examples abound everywhere, as can be seen by reading the diverse papers collected in this book⁶.

All these precedents demonstrate that the morphology of the international imperialist system has, indeed, undergone major modifications. However, the latter have not altered the essence of the system. Globalization did not put an end to imperialism nor has it caused the latter to turn into its opposite. What it did do is accentuate the features that traditionally characterized this phase of capitalism, on the basis of a deepening of injustice and of inequity both within nations and in the international system. The traditional mechanisms of imperialism continue to stand: the exaction of natural resources and wealth; the sucking in of the periphery's surpluses towards the metropolitan centers; the role of financial capitalism, which, as we said above, has burgeoned extraordinarily; the monopolistic concentration that has reached unprecedented levels; the framework of rules that neoconservatism continues to be, in its most globalized form; and, above all, there still persist those institutions that in past, when it was said that imperialism was at its peak, made possible the iron-clad dictatorship of capital over the peoples and the countries of the periphery. Once again we refer fundamentally to the IMF, the WB, the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) and the WTO, institutions which far from representing the international community are the docile instruments of the dominant classes at worldwide level and above all of United States imperialism.

Pending issues

Many matters, however, remain pending when it comes to obtaining an adequate and sufficient diagnosis of the imperialism of our days. Currently, one of the most important is the correct identification of the situation in the imperial center. There is a debate that has been underway for a long time, which has already materialized at the three World Social Forums in Porto Alegre and that also appeared at the meeting in Havana: it is the controversy over the current reality and the economic, political and military future of the United States.

Positions hover around two poles: there are those who assert that, after the crisis of the 1970s, we are in the presence of a recomposition of the U.S. hegemony in the military, economic, political and social fields; and there are those who, on the contrary, support a thesis that postulates the weakening of the United States in the world arena. The U.S. would thus have passed its peak and now faces its inexorable twilight. It is a debate that has not been settled and that in the future we shall need to continue broaching in all its complexity because it is in no way a minor issue.

The supporters of the latter view, which in its most general formulation we do not share but which it is convenient to examine in all its details, maintain that the United States has begun a slow but incurable decadence, and that because of this, the center of gravity of the world economy is shifting irreversibly towards Southeast Asia. The consequence of this mutation is that the imperialism we know today will surely not survive in the future. There are many works which point in this direction. The most recent and substantial in its argumentation is a book by Professor André Gunder Frank whose title *Re-Orient*—proposes, precisely, returning to the Orient because it is there that the center of the world economy of capitalism supposedly was, several centuries ago, and will be (in a relatively near future). If this trend comes to pass, the United States would cease to perform the decisive role it now plays in the international system. We are not convinced by this posture because it underestimates the irreplaceable role that, at least for the foreseeable future, the United States performs and

7 It is no minor fact that in Latin America and the Caribbean there do not exist any study centers or research programs exclusively focusing on analyzing the *problématique* of the United States in its most varied aspects. The little there is to be found in Cuba, especially in the framework of the Center for Studies on America (CEA). Mexico had a couple of institutions devoted to the subject but they were purposely dismantled during the neoliberal wave unleashed by Salinas de Gortari and, above all, with entry into the Free Trade Agreement. It was no longer necessary to study the United States, something which certainly caused upset and distrust in governing circles North of the Rio Grande. Meanwhile, in the United States the centers, institutes and programs devoted to the study of Mexico and Mexican-U.S. relations add up to over a hundred! Brazil, too, currently has no study center devoted to the United States, although there is an attempt underway at the Fluminense Federal University (UFF). In the rest of the countries of the region there aren't even any attempts. The Menemist Argentina that exalted the "carnal relations" with the United States had no reason to busy itself with the subject, and the same goes for the other governments of the region. An extremely clear, clamorous proof that the other side of imperialism is colonialism over knowledge and power, and of the persistence of a tradition of subjection that has become flesh in our countries. We don't even make so bold as to venture to study those who, as Simón Bolívar said at the time, "seemed destined by Providence to plague the Americas with miseries in the name of freedom." Regarding colonialism over knowledge and power, see the excellent compilation by Edgardo Lander (2000).

will continue to exercise as the final custodian and coercionary reinsurance of the imperialist system. Additionally, it seems to us that a thesis like this one –as do others, which posit the impregnable and invincible nature of the empire– could eventually have serious demobilizing consequences, above all for us in Latin America and the Caribbean. Nevertheless, it is very important to discuss it. The future course of the United States and its role in the preservation of the imperialist order is a central issue for our peoples and, for this reason, constitutes a subject which will never be studied in excess⁷.

The other issue is the following: how to refine the analysis of imperialism in the current situation. I firmly believe that this is a very important point, both in the terrain of theory and in that of practical struggle. It is necessary to avoid falling into views of imperialism that transform it into an omniscient, omnipresent and omnipotent phenomenon. If such a view gains strength in the ranks of its critics and coagulates in public conscience the logical consequence is irrefutable: imperialism is invincible, unbeatable, impregnable and, therefore, it makes no sense to even attempt to fight against it. We believe it important to point out that the geometry of imperialism is very complex and cannot be reduced to one dimension alone. To paraphrase an image proposed in a recent article by Joseph Nye (2003), one might say that imperialism deploys its assets on three levels, as if on three different chessboards. A first chessboard is the military one, in which, as was seen above, U.S. supremacy is absolute.

Of course it is convenient to introduce a note of caution here, because what is the meaning of an *absolute* military supremacy? Does it mean it can inexorably win all wars? But what does “win” mean? What is the lesson to be derived from Iraq or from Afghanistan? Robin Cook, former Foreign Minister of Great Britain, and who resigned precisely because of opposition to the complicity of Tony Blair’s government in the pillage perpetrated by George W. Bush and his friends, wrote a few days ago that “conquering Iraq probably was easy, but governing it as an occupied nation is a much more difficult challenge”. (Cook, 2004) The lesson which we can derive from recent events is the following: the formidable power of the United States military machinery allows the U.S. to raze a country. However, as is proved by the cases of Afghanistan and Iraq, Washington has demonstrated it is impotent when it comes to controlling the countries it has devastated. The North Americans have been unable to re-establish an order, even if it be an authoritarian and despotic order, to enable society to func-

tion again. Consequently, although U.S. military supremacy appears unarguable, the following question remains: when is a war won? After George W. Bush's famous public appearance in San Diego, on May 1st; 2003, many more North American victims have been harvested than before. It is therefore necessary to review with extreme care what it means to win a war. United States military supremacy may be very large, very overwhelming, but it reaches a certain point. And territorial control, the "normalization" of the conquered society, continues to be the true acid test that decides whether a war has been won or not, this being a truth that has been recognized by all the great theoreticians of war, from Sun-Tzu to von Clausewitz and Nguyen Giap, naturally including Machiavelli. It is also convenient to recall, to temper the diagnoses that only look at the asymmetries in weaponry, that the United States was defeated in Cuba, at the Bay of Pigs, and that it suffered a catastrophic and humiliating defeat in Vietnam. To summarize: the military supremacy of the U.S. is unquestionable, but it is not absolute.

The economic terrain would be the second chessboard on which imperialist relations are deployed. Although in the first one U.S. superiority is enormous, in this one Washington enjoys an undoubted but already much more limited predominance. Not only is it unable to impose a given international economic order on the countries of the periphery but it cannot even achieve a serious and effective agreement with its own allies in the European Union and Japan. The successive failures of WTO gatherings and of the proposals to sign the FTAA (Free Trade Agreement of the Americas) are more than convincing proof in this regard. In other words: thirty years after the occurrence of the crisis in the Bretton Woods system –the "international order" shaped at the end of the Second World War– even today imperialism has been unable to build a stable economic order to replace it, with the ability to contain and solve the crises and contradictions roiling within it. Naturally, such a lack has not prevented the imperialists from continuing with their policies of pillage and sack. What can indeed be pointed out, instead, is that those operations are carried out within an increasingly unstable and unpredictable framework, and that they must resort ever further to the militarization of their domination for the system to work. All this doubtlessly conspires against the long-term stability of the system and the possibility of optimizing the results of their investments and corporate strategies.

The field of international civil society would be the third chessboard on which, according to Nye, imperialism plays its match. There the position of the United States is much more unfavorable after the disarticulation of the strategic alliances, the political and governmental systems and the ideological orientations that operated since the end of the second postwar period. The interminable succession of wrongs and dislocations of all kinds suffered by peoples, especially in the periphery, and the contradictions ensuing from the hegemony of neoliberalism, have led as a result to the constitution of an extremely broad array of social movements with overwhelming strength and which express themselves all over the world, from Seattle to Porto Alegre, and including Genoa, Gothenburg, Tokyo and Paris. In Latin America, and this was pointed out by Perry Anderson in his presentation, it is necessary to recognize the exceptional importance earned by Zapatism by issuing that first summons, at an international level, to the struggle for humanity and against neoliberalism. That exhortation acquired universal citizenship status with the holding of the World Social Forums in Porto Alegre and, afterwards, with the propagation of these protests along the length and breadth of the planet. This “movement of movements,” which encompasses large masses of workers, of youths, of women, of indigenous peoples, of minorities of every kind, of social sectors previously not incorporated into the dialectic of the confrontation with capitalism, now appears with extraordinary force, revealing the increasing weakness demonstrated by the old organizations (especially parties and unions) that, in a previous phase of capitalism, represented the demands of the sectors oppressed by the system. And this change in international civil society has been so sizable that the uncontested hegemony that neoliberal thinking enjoyed until a few years ago –and which, for example, allowed the “lords of money”, as they are called by Subcommander Marcos, to meet in Davos enjoying virtually universal popularity– has evaporated to the point that they now have to gather in remote and inaccessible places, as if they were a gang of malefactors, in order to discuss their world domination plans. And this reveals the enormous change that has been recorded in the world correlation of forces, which, for the first time since the mid-70s, leads to an anti-neoliberal and potentially anti-capitalist counter-offensive that puts the dominant financial oligarchies on the defensive.

We believe, in consequence, that taking these precedents into account –and others which it would be necessary to add as the work-

ing agenda unfolds— it should be possible to advance toward a more elaborate and nuanced characterization of what imperialist domination is today, avoiding the theoretical and practical immobilism of those who assert there is nothing new under the sun and, at the same time, the pessimism that is the result of a summary evaluation —and one which in our judgement is superficial, being one-sided— of imperialism on the basis of United States military predominance.

A conclusion that is an invitation

No doubt about it —we are living in a very special moment in the history of imperialism: the transition from a classical phase to another, whose outline is only now being drawn but whose general shape can already be clearly discerned. Nothing could be further wrong than postulating the existence of a nebulous “empire without imperialism.” Hence the need to argue with these theses, given the exceptional gravity of the current situation: a capitalism that is ever more regressive and reactionary in the social, economic, political and cultural spheres, which criminalizes social protest and militarizes international politics on the basis of the absolute primacy of force. In the face of a situation like this one, as we maintained, only a precise diagnosis of the structure and operation of the international imperialist system will allow social movements, parties, unions and the popular organizations to broach the new days of struggle with some possibility of success. No emancipatory struggle is possible in the absence of an adequate social cartography of the terrain on which the battles will be fought. It is useless to lovingly project the features of a new society without a realistic knowledge of the physiognomy of current society and of the path which it will be necessary to traverse in the construction of that world in which (almost) all worlds will fit, to paraphrase the saying of the Zapatists. All the worlds of the oppressed, we would add, in order not to fall into a dangerous romanticism. In this new world that it is essential to begin to build right now there will be no room for the world of the militarist hawks; for the clique of the Bushes, Blairs, Aznars, Sharons and company; for the monopolies that turned humanity and nature into their prey; for the politicians and social leaders who accompanied and/or consented to the holocaust unleashed by neoliberalism. A post-capitalist and post-imperialist world is possible, but first we have to change the current one. And this is not achieved by

working on the basis of illusions but by acting with the grounding of a realistic and precise knowledge of the world we wish to leave behind and of the road we have to travel.

Allow me to conclude by saying that these discussions, stimulated by that noble striving of the social scientists and humanists linked to the CLACSO network to recover critical thinking, were facilitated by a very important factor: the contact established between Latin American critical thinking and the practice of the social movements that fight against neoliberalism, neoliberal globalization and, in the ultimate instance, against capitalism. This interaction has had a virtuous effect on both sides: it has enriched the output of social scientists, making it more acute and penetrating. And it has also improved the quality of the social leadership. At the conference which we reproduce in this book, Perry Anderson said that this continent is the only one which, in a constant manner and with significant theoretical density, had developed a notable intellectual production contesting and criticizing capitalism. We believe that this contact between social scientists and social movements marks a new milestone in the development of the social sciences, which in Latin America –and in the rest of the world– were activities that were carried out in the safe but sterile spaces of academe. Academicist sterility was a fundamental element in determining the deep crisis into which the social sciences fell as of the 1970s, a crisis from which they haven't yet recovered. The type of approaches and approximations that we have seen at this Conference in Havana has demonstrated to be much richer. The essential theoretical discussion that characterizes the social sciences has been enormously favored by the tight link that has been established on this continent, even though in an unequal manner, between the practice of social scientists and the praxis of social movements. To promote this dialogue is one of the distinctive goals of CLACSO and of many other national institutions in Latin America, and the success of this undertaking summons us to continue along this line, deepening this linkage, and knowing that in this manner we not only contribute to build a better world but, at the same time, produce social science of better quality.

This is, in very broad terms, a brief summary of the issues that have been discussed this week. Having said which, I would like to ask President Fidel Castro Ruz if he would have the kindness to pronounce the closing words of this conference. Thank you very much.

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